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A PEEP AT COUNTRY COUSINS, AND HOW IT ENDED.

LETTER III.

Whitehaven, June 24th, 1820.

MY DEAR FATHER,—I have been long in writing, and I do not know how it is that one seems to be quite as busy in the country as in the town, and I could fancy it would be very agreeable to live here permanently, if the good folks only knew a little more about books. Yet I believe Robert is a very well-read young man, but he is so shy and reserved. I do not feel much better acquainted with him than on my first arrival. He is, however, very attentive in catering for my amusement, and on the morning of May-day he invited me to join a merry party of young men and maidens, who sallied forth at five o'clock in the morning to gather the soft yellow catkins of the willow, and I observed that William presented his basketful to Susannah; since which occurrence, she has conducted herself towards me so frankly and affectionately, that I feel sure she must be attached to William, and had previously feared my becoming her rival. I do not know what Robert did with his catkins, and I found him so silent a companion, that I was not sorry when we quitted the meadows and went to look at the old May-pole, which a crowd of ragged urchins, under the direction of the dominie, were covering with garlands of spring flowers. Almost every house in the village displayed bunches of broom and furze over their doors and lamp-posts, and all the horses engaged in traffic throughout Whitehaven and the neighbourhood were adorned with branches of lilac, or ribbons, or ivy. Later on in the day, I believe some animated games of wrestling went on, many competitors attending the sport from distant places; but this amusement was not at all in my line, and I enjoyed much more a novel sort of race they called a dog-trail. Early in the morning, I was told, two men had started on a circuit of eight miles, dragging after them over hill and dale a large piece of sailcloth saturated with some essential oil. The dogs that were to run were really splendid creatures, and my uncle says they are similar to fox-hounds, but of a peculiar breed, brought up for the purpose by the country people, and singularly swift in action. A row of these fine creatures was laid on the scent where the cloth had passed over, and then they scoured over the whole distance without a single pause—William's beautiful dog, which he had named "Gawthorpe," coming in first, and winning the prize, a very handsome riding-whip mounted in silver. Robert's noble "Arrow" came in the second, but its master looked so excessively mortified at this comparative failure, that I could not help pitying him, though I knew better than to express such a sentiment in words to one of his lordly sex. We were engaged that evening to "go forth," as Susannah expressed it, which seems understood to mean attending an evening meeting for spinning; and on this occasion the party were to meet at Mr. Gawthorpe's, a substantial farmer's abode, some three miles off. I was in some doubts what dress to put on, since the guests were to assemble at three o'clock in broad daylight; but my aunt said every one was expected to look smart, so I put on my sprigged muslin, which had duly arrived, though it was sadly crushed, my dear papa, by the heavy parcel of music-books you had laid upon it. Susannah appeared in a gay broom-coloured gauze gown, with scarlet ribbons in her hair; and we put on all sorts of defensive wraps to protect our finery safely, over the mountain bogs, being followed by Neddy, the cow-boy, who carried my aunt's spinning-wheel, destined for my use. I asked her whether she was not coming with us, a question which made every one laugh, and to which no answer was vouchsafed in words; but on reaching the Gawthorpe's homestead, we were ushered into an oak-pannelled hall-kitchen, containing at least twenty young women, all busy with their spinning-wheels, but no elder female or any of the men were present. I did my best to spin like they did, and to give my finger and thumb the peculiar dale-twist used in pulling the flax from the distaff, but I saw many good-humoured smiles directed towards me, and was glad when the general attention was diverted by the buzz of conversation which soon began.

The girls sang, too, and I heard several quaint old songs which sounded very sweet, though often given in a sort of monotonous slow chaunting, in order to keep time with the burring wheels. Curious tales, too, were told; and one young woman mentioned a strange superstition that exists about the aspen tree, of its being the wood of which the *vera couz* was made, and how, in sign of shame and fear, it has ever since trembled from generation to generation. We had been spinning a couple of hours when my cousins, Robert, William, and Edward, made their appearance, and they were quickly followed by other young dalesmen, who each demurely took a seat by some fair expectant—at least, those assembled appeared in no way surprised at this sudden accession to our party. By and bye I found my thread kept breaking so frequently as to be quite unaccountable; in vain it seemed to fasten on again, for the very next minute snap went the thread, and on looking round I saw to my relief that other spinners were in the same predicament, while sounds of repressed laughter seemed to indicate the brewing of some hidden mischief. I perceived several sharp boxes on the ear administered to the attendant cavaliers, and presently saw that Edward had been cutting the thread of my flax; and I certainly gave his black curls a little pull on this discovery, while Robert sat just behind me, looking too shy and awkward to interfere between me and his younger brother, who had never before been considered old enough to be admitted to the honours of a "going forth." After a good deal of merriment, the burring of the twenty wheels, which sounded like fifty hives of bees confined in the apartment, ceased altogether, and, after a plentiful supper, old Mrs. Gawthorpe told ghost stories and fairy legends, and about eight o'clock the signal was given for breaking up, by the farmer saying, "It is time for ye to be going home, bairns." We must have formed a droll moonlight procession over the mountains, each maiden escorted by a rough-coated gallant bearing her spinning-wheel on his shoulder; and frequent bursts of laughter were elicited by the various mischances that overtook us during the rough pilgrimage. I was well off, since Edward carried my wheel, and consequently Robert gave me the assistance of his arm unincumbered; but he seemed more silent than ever, and when we reached the Friars, I overheard Johnny Latterthwaite say to him, "Why don't you speak to her, man; do ye think a woman will ever admire a glum lad that has nought to say for himself?" To which remonstrance, Robert replied, if I am not mistaken: "Ye may be right, man, in the main, but did ye ever see any one dressed like my London cousin afore? When I saw her looking so superior, and so unlike every one about her to-night, I tell ye I did not dare to speak a word to her." I had half suspected this reason for my grave cousin's reserve; yet he is so sensible, I wonder he should let such a trifle as my sprigged muslin prevent our conversing comfortably together. Yesterday was Midsummer-eve (the 23d of June is so kept popularly), and we all went out to look at the immense bonfires which were lighted up in all directions in each parish, and called Baal-fires; perhaps the only relic of fire-worship, Robert said, in England still remaining. The lurid effect of the blazing fires illuminating the dark purple hills was extremely grand, and I should have wished so picturesque an old custom might continue for many years to come, where it not that it is still regarded by the uneducated as something mysterious and sacredly supernatural. Quantities of poor diseased cattle and sheep we saw made to walk through the blinding smoke of these fires, and none of the dales-people appeared to entertain the slightest doubt that the animals would be thereby perfectly restored to health. The Baal-fires are never allowed to be lighted from any other burning substance, as this would destroy their virtues, but must be ignited from the sparks created by rubbing together two pieces of dry wood; and many persons carried torches, which added to the wild singular aspect of the scene, and are also a remnant of the same species of nature-worship. And now I have only left room to sign myself, dear papa,

Your ever affectionate daughter,
DORA HARCOURT.